

Geoffrey Craig
The Brave Maiden — A Verse Novel
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Preface

“The Brave Maiden” will be serialized in “Wilderness House Literary Review”. Should a reader miss a month or wish to re-read an earlier chapter, the prior installments will be available in the magazine’s online archives.

I originally wrote “The Brave Maiden” as a Christmas present for my then eleven-year-old daughter. The genesis of the poem was a series of stories I had told my daughter a few years earlier. Not yet a writer and doubting my imagination, I borrowed from the Robin Hood legend changing, however, the protagonist to a young woman.

The poem is set in a Thirteenth Century England ruled by a wicked king who allows vile barons to run rampant. Mayhem prevails and true justice is non-existent. Among the worst of these barons was one Count Gerard who, while the Brave Maiden is on her morning ride, murders her reform-minded father and the rest of her family. Swearing revenge, she flees to the forest where her adventures begin as she seeks to bring peace, order and prosperity to the blood-soaked country.

A panoply of spirit folk and uniquely-endowed animals appear in the poem and play their parts alongside multifarious humans, some of whom bear resemblance to characters in the Robin Hood saga.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Prologue England (13th Century)

England, fairest England, cowered in fear;
Doom was forecast by each prophet and seer.
Grim death and hunger roamed all through the land.
Drowned merchants' corpses washed up on the sand
As wild pirates plied their odious trade
And seldom, if ever, were good laws made.
Greed and rank lust begat crimes everywhere;
Taxes were more than poor peasants could bear.
Arrogant knights weak villages plundered;
>From their sacred oaths, their swords were sundered.
Earls and dukes, now a perfidious breed,
Their vassals and liegemen they chose to bleed,
Who, in turn, fastened fat reeves like leeches
On farms and fields, leaving naught but breeches
To humble serfs they were sworn to protect.
This corruption the Church did soon infect.
No longer for victims sanctuaries,
Chapels amassed gilded reliquaries.
Freebooting knights violated the Mass,
Looting pockets in a manner most crass.
Even poor wayfarers feared for their lives;
And many fell to brigands' cruel knives.
They would cut you for two pence or a pound
And leave your throat gushing blood on the ground.
For a fever that of its own accord
Would have soon vanished like the Golden Horde,
A barber would bleed you with rusted knife,
Then impound your farm including your wife
If you refused to pay his cutthroat fee,
To which in dire panic you did agree.
Justice might be found in the rich squire's court,

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Of course with a bribe with which to resort.
Honor and valor were in short supply;
For the slightest reason, a man could die.
King John sat atop this foul heap of dung,
A villain but wanting his praises sung;
And so he pretends to great piety
While stealing with all due propriety.
Followed by a cadre of scant regard;
The vilest was a count known as Gerard,
A knight who murdered for gold and pleasure,
His coffers flowing with jeweled treasure.
He confiscates lands without a writ
As the King's right-hand man and favorite.
Peasants huddled in fear when he rode by;
His heart stone though he hear a baby cry
>From hunger because the year's crops had failed.
Next to Gerard, even the devil paled!
His skin mottled, his mouth drawn and thin,
He had a scar that ran from cheek to chin.
Fear caused the serfs to see portents and signs
In breeding stock turned barren and sour wines.
Comets tempted sages to prophecy;
The times brought priests to fetid heresy.
A skulking dog howled at an eclipsed moon;
The dread Apocalypse will follow soon.
Weary scholars cried as they knelt and quaked;
Haggard crones through goats' gory entrails raked.
Men fled to worship in ancient cromlechs
Seeking some relief from moth-eaten texts.
One light shone in this dark night of evil:
A crusading earl both strong and civil
Who sought long and hard for a path of peace
And thought the future lay with King John's niece.
He had a fair daughter whom he adored,
Teaching her early to fight with a sword.

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But there was more in this strife-torn nation:
A mystic world of imagination.
Sprites, goblins and elves filled an airy scene
With joyous games led by an elfin Queen.

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I. The Forest (1205 A.D.)

Dark green shone the forest that April day.
The streams crested their banks along her way.
Swollen drops fell from the thick, mottled trees;
And tender leaves sighed in the fresh spring breeze.
Her cloak felt heavy with the morning dew.
The bright, rising sun struggled to break through
The sodden, grey clouds covering the sky.
She rode tensely, keeping a wary eye,
For in fair England, these were troubled times;
And many fell victim to ghastly crimes.
A pile of leaves her bed the night before,
She rose to her feet feeling wet and sore.
Taking from her pouch a stale crust of bread,
She let cold stream water clear her thick head.
She rode a lean, sure-footed chestnut mare.
They appeared to be an unlikely pair
To travel alone in this fearsome land
Where cutthroats ventured only in a band.
Four weary, hungry days has she traveled
Fleeing from a scene that had unraveled
Her young nerves and left her senses frozen.
To escape death, why had she been chosen?
Finding the bodies lying all around,
She had screamed without uttering a sound.
Wearing doeskin trousers of palest blue,
A soiled doublet and velvet cap askew,
She sat easily in her fine saddle,
Ready to smite any foe in battle.
Hanging from her pommel, a sword at rest;
She wore a dagger with a fancy crest.
She was a slender girl of just sixteen.

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Thick chestnut hair framed a face tan and lean
And shone brightly as autumn leaves on fire.
She sat as straight as the lonely church spire
Rising near where her Father's castle stood
By a clear river near a game-filled wood.
She recalled that the castle was no more
And the revenge that on her knees she swore,
Kneeling in tears by the newly filled graves
Dug with the help of two loyal Welsh slaves.
Her flashing eyes were the most startling blue.
Her winsome gaze was level, firm and true;
But now fat tears rolled down her slender cheeks,
And her sad face was marked with muddy streaks.
The sun began to warm her chill body.
She smiled a little and thought how shoddy
Her dank clothes must look and how her Mother
Would scold – and how she missed her small brother.
She paused to watch a shaft of intense light
Pierce the thick forest gloom with all its might.
Staring at the spot where the sunlight struck,
She spotted a gleam in the leafy muck.
Her probing fingers found a silver coin.
She groaned as she thought of the juicy loin
Of pork to be bought at the village fair
With several copper pennies to spare.
The coin found a home in her leather pouch.
Hearing a sharp noise, she dropped to a crouch
And touched the crested dagger in her belt.
Something wild was near: not yet seen but felt.
A snarling boar stood not five rods away;
Her skittish mare reared and began to neigh.
The sharp, curving tusks caught the maiden's eye.
"I have a lot to do before I die,"
Ran through her head as she reached for her sword.
The feral beast snorted loudly and pawed

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

The earth. Pointing her sword towards its snout,
She jiggled her pouch; and the coin fell out.
The charging boar halted as if struck dead,
Turned and through the forest in panic fled.
Picking up the coin, she, for the first time,
Saw symbols that made neither sense nor rhyme.
Putting the magic coin back in its place,
She mounted and set off at a brisk pace.
Her clothes were now dry, but sharp hunger pangs
Attacked her stomach with ravenous fangs
Whose fury a hearty stew could appease.
The crust of bread was but a naughty tease.
She had never thought much on food before;
Plentiful had been the table and more.
Her father was lord of a great fiefdom
Of rich woods and farms in John's broad kingdom.
He was a kindly man though somewhat gruff
Who ensured his loyal serfs had enough
To eat and warm, fustian clothing to wear.
Many other nobles seemed not to care.
To the west lay the broad Blaxford Forest
Whose game added to the autumn harvest.
Northwards, Count Gerard ruled his vast estate
As befits a man of huge greed and hate.
She rode without plan or destination
But just to flee the stark desolation.
The terrified peasants begged her to leave,
Which gave her precious little time to grieve.
Count Gerard, they said, would surely return
To murder her and very likely burn
What little he had last time left behind.
She had taken her morning ride, to find
Returning, the bodies of her parents
And the whole household, not sparing servants.
Kneeling and rocking by her Father's side,

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

His stiff, lifeless hand, she held fast and cried.
Then she noticed something awfully strange:
His long, blood-stained sword lay just out of range,
But his crested dagger could not be found
Though she searched all over the blood-soaked ground.
This dagger in his belt he always wore;
It was the wellspring of family lore,
Given to each member who learned to fight.
She was the first maiden to earn the right
To wear this family badge of honor.
But she had yet to test her young valor
On the fearful field of mortal combat.
Skilled also with a lance, she firmly sat
Her horse in many a shire tournament.
Facing a determined foe who is bent
On killing you is clearly something else.
Your knees turn to jelly; your stomach melts.
Hard-bitten knights have fled the gory field
Or gotten down on craven knees to yield.
Her thoughts had drifted to a steaming bath
When a scared, little rabbit crossed her path.
Wishing she had been taught to use the bow,
She heard her Father's words almost as though
He was standing there: tall, serene and proud.
She had knelt before him, head slightly bowed.
In a voice that belied his gentle soul,
He described a noble warrior's role:
"The sword is the arm of a war-like race
Followed in turn by hammer, lance and mace.
The bow belongs to our good yeoman friends
Who help our noble purposes and ends."
Her Father took this duty as given:
To bring peace to a land sadly riven
By cutthroat barons and a greedy king.
These vicious murders could mean just one thing -

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For evil Gerard was but King John's tool
To perpetuate his inhuman rule.
The count's own objective was far less grand:
Enough for him to be the king's right hand.
Her solemn thoughts were suddenly disturbed
By shrill, jolting insults that flew uncurbed
Through the dense forest and assailed her ears.
She spurred on the mare despite gnawing fears.

II

The Yeoman's Son

"Cursed be ye blasphemous, murdering thieves;
Stay away from me, or you'll see who grieves."
With that, he smote fervently left and right,
Wielding an oaken staff with all his might.
He was a wiry lad with curly hair
And did not seem one to easily scare.
But the fight was not to his advantage;
His bleeding forehead needed a bandage.
Bow and arrows were slung across his back;
On the ground lay an old, disheveled pack.
Three scowling knaves advanced, daggers ready;
She cantered to the fray, sword held steady.
Swinging precisely, she sliced off an ear;
The villain's scream you could easily hear
Halfway across the thickly wooded shire.
The scream only raised her hackles higher:
Another stroke and she dislodged a nose.
This scarred ruffian would no longer pose
A major threat to a traveler's rest.
The cursing, ill-clad rascals thought it best
To take, like screeching magpies, to their heels,
Dodging through the trees like slippery eels.
The young fellow stood and intensely gazed
At this slim girl who was indeed amazed
That her first battle was so quickly done.
My God, she thought, it seems I've really won.
"I could have handled those knaves on my own,"
He said in a surly, complaining tone.
"Of that, I'm quite sure," she gently replied.
"But that I need practice, I cannot hide."
At that, he changed his tone and bowed his head:
"Your servant, milady," he shyly said.

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"How well, my new friend, can you shoot that bow?"

A novel idea began to grow.

He smiled a winning smile of jagged teeth

And took an arrow from his ragged sheath.

Duly impressed with an expert display,

Supper, she thought, will soon be on the way.

Munching thereafter on a tender hare,

Seldom could she remember better fare.

She poked a pointed stick into the fire

And thought perhaps a good time to inquire:

"What is your given name? Where are you from?"

"Wales, milady. And my name is William.

Son of honest yeomen and not a serf,

My one aim in life is to prove my worth."

"William the Archer, I wish to call thee;

Of service, sans doute, you will prove to be.

Father taught me the sword, my Mother, French;

But I spent scant time on a student's bench.

I would rather gallop than read a book

Though at a few pages I'll sneak a look.

Dear Mother said that one of high degree

Needs reading, writing and diplomacy,

Not just to sit a horse or swing a sword.

But with my books, I was so often bored."

"Milady, I would fain learn how to read;

We Welsh have always been a fighting breed

And have too long ignored the scholar's art

For which we care not a fig nor a fart."

She nodded and regarded him in turn:

"You as well have a skill that I must learn:

To draw and shoot with yon bow and arrow

Well enough to hit a fleeting sparrow."

Next day William chose a tall, slender yew;

And with fast, deft strokes, he began to hew

A long bow with a supple, arching curve.

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He searched for narrow feathers that would serve
To propel her arrows smoothly and straight.
By then the afternoon was growing late,
So on a broad, elm tree, he loosed some bark.
"Milady, pray thee hit that easy mark."
She drew back the bowstring and then let fly.
"Perhaps you'll improve on the second try."
Her arrow had not simply missed the tree;
It had fallen hardly beyond her knee.
He demonstrated how to draw the string
And alongside her cheek two fingers bring.
Her second shot did not come a crupper
So happily they sat down to supper.
The roasted squirrel was a little tough.
She longed for the old castle cook enough
(With her fragrant herbs and hot, pungent stews)
To sigh ever so quietly and lose
Herself in a far distant reverie.
William chewed his food and watched patiently,
His heart catching fire with a budding love
That came, he surely knew, from God above.
"Your mare," William asked. "Does she have a name?"
"With her reddish color, I call her Flame."
"Milady, I wander because our land
Goes to the eldest: though poor - nothing grand.
I have pursued an unsavory way;
An archer finds it hard to earn his pay.
But pray tell me, if I may prove so bold:
What brings a noble maid into this cold,
Unforgiving, dark and frightening wood -
Crowded with spirits that intend no good?"
"Faith, lad, so adept with bow and arrow,
Dost thou fear the merest, flitting shadow?"
A soft, swirling breeze stirred her reddish hair.
A smile graced her lips - from she knew not where.

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Just for a moment, she heard a whisper.
Her cheek felt as though someone had kissed her.
Absentmindedly she rubbed at the spot,
Then sternly shook her head. No, it cannot
Be. That's what my dear Father loved to do;
My mind knows how to play a trick or two.
The whispering breeze swirled around once more;
A few leaves rustled on the forest floor.
"All were murdered by a cutthroat baron
Who should be hung like a common felon.
Our castle burnt, my family all killed;
I swore a sacred oath to be fulfilled
When craven Gerard lies dead at my feet.
My avenging fury he will not cheat.
Father long dreamed of a peace enduring.
Yet peace is but a phantom alluring
While the nobles rampage and kill unchecked;
And our lands, and hopes, are cruelly wrecked.
True justice is everywhere over thrown
With evil consequences yet unknown.
Thievery and craven murder abound;
The poor peasants suffer without a sound.
Their children have scarcely enough to eat
When they are shorn of their barley and wheat."
"Brave words, milady, that rightly inspire
And should impel our lords to some higher
Duty. But how says our most worthy King?"
"Our King is found worthy in just one thing:
Levying taxes to increase his wealth.
He cares naught for his wretched people's health."
"What then, milady, can a poor soul do?"
"I wish I knew, William, I wish I knew.
But for now, I pray, let us take our ease
And study this a moment if you please."
Speaking thus, from her leather pouch she drew

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A worn book with a cover limned in blue.
"I anticipate, Will, that your first try
Goes further than I made an arrow fly."
With heads bowed together by the firelight,
She gave a lesson from Tales of a Knight.

III
The Tinker

Apollo burst at dawn from his palace,
And Spring painted a riotous canvas
Of blazing flowers and ripening buds.
She chewed cold squirrel as cows chew their cuds.
Her thoughts whirling and her spirits giddy,
She recalled the much-teased antique biddy
Who throughout the year was mean and cranky
But come spring would wave a faded hanky,
Go half mad and dance on the village green
As if beguiled by a translucent queen.
The nectar of spring has this wild effect,
She thought, and may in us show some defect
That our hearts, which should be forever sad,
Can, with spring's coming, turn foolish and glad.
Brightly clad nature to our minds imparts
A febrile joy, but not peace to our hearts.
Let not memories spoil this sunny day,
But rather mount up and be on our way.
"We must find a place in the forest deep
Where we can in due safety live and sleep."
She rode, with William walking by her side
Thinking how he could travel far and wide
And nowhere find such a smart, comely maid;
Nor one who was truly so unafraid
Of the myriad dangers lurking near.
For while young William felt nary a fear
Of any mortal be it man or beast,
The unseen world of spirits never ceased
To fill his mind with wonder and alarm
Though he could never point to any harm
That hobgoblins or pranking elves had caused.
Then in this ambling reverie, he paused

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

To remember from home the pretty lass
Who burst into twinges one day in mass,
Hopped about and skipped in a crazy dance
And then collapsed on the floor in a trance.
"Jealous wood nymphs," said superstitious folk,
"Cast on her a spell – their malicious joke."
"Blasphemy," said the priest sounding severe.
"Twas due to kissing boys and drinking beer."
"William! Pray, have you heard a single word?
Am I twittering like a silly bird?"
"Yes, milady ... I mean, certainly not,"
Stammered the poor lad as his face grew hot.
"Father, as I was saying, had a plan
That he shared with only one trusted man,
A boon companion and wise magician
Who became counselor and physician."
"Was he not then murdered with all the rest?"
"No, by God's grace, he was traveling west
On a mission to the Welch border earls.
He carried a dozen luminous pearls -
One for each lord to take a solemn pledge
That justice (a right not a privilege)
They would, unto death, uphold with their swords
Thus putting a curb on all wayward lords.
Wouldst that our wise Ormond were here today;
That he remains safe, we can only pray."
They then heard something altogether queer:
A whining voice murmuring words unclear.
Curious, she drew her sword just in case
And rode forward at a slow, cautious pace.
William followed the mare staying close by -
With his oaken staff held firmly and high
Ready to cudgel a threatening foe,
Whether his station be high-born or low.
A few paces on, they saw a clearing

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And advanced to the edge, keenly peering
Through the trees to see an astounding sight:
A stout man of more than usual height
With a flowing beard and dark, curly hair
Chanting while nodding his large head in prayer.
His words and manner to her appeared odd;
Apparently he was addressing God.
Riding past the trees, she said, "Good morning."
He looked at them and without a warning,
Picked up a tall staff and prepared to fight.
"Kind sir, we mean no harm; do not take fright,
Nor find in us a cause for self-defense.
We intend only to inquire from whence
You come and what is, God's grace, that language?
Its meaning is more than I can manage."
"This tongue, dear lady, is known as Hebrew:
The proper language of prayer for a Jew.
Our rabbi claims it as ancient as Greek,
But I find it impossible to speak."
"Indeed," said William. "It is Greek to me;
And if impossible you need to see,
Why then I beg you try my native Welch,
That sounds to most ears like a donkey's belch."
"Enough, William, of this idle chatter;
I have need to ask some things that matter.
Pray tell, Excellency, what is a Jew?
I have once heard spoken of such as you
But only as concerns the lender's trade
That, to reverent Christians, God forbade."
"Ours, dear lady, is a tormented race
That endlessly wanders from place to place.
My religion, indeed, gave birth to yours;
We mourn Jerusalem that always lures.
My early years I spent in London town
With parents who revered the cap and gown

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

That scholars don. I prefer adventure,
A good fight and strong ale. Damn the censure
Of my pale and pusillanimous kin
Who have no fun - nor a pot to piss in.
As wandering tinker, I earn my keep;
Under the star-filled sky, I love to sleep.
But most of all, I crave venison stew:
I have been asked: 'Are you in truth a Jew?'
Meat tastes best when poached from a lord's preserve;
It's the least that we common folk deserve.
As an observant Jew, I say my prayers
Even making the rounds of the shire fairs.
I mend pots and pans and whatever else
The peasants have. I fix saddles and belts
And sharpen dull knives with a grinding stone
So that they cut right through gristle and bone."
Hearing this gave the maid a sudden start;
She felt a fleeting tremor in her heart.
"If dull knives thou canst so easily hone,
Canst thou temper swords on thy grinding stone?
If a fight thou love so well as you claim,
We have double reason to know your name
And seek to know if you will join our quest
For justice - but for now a place to rest
And there ponder how we three may proceed
To avenge a slaughter and by such deed
Bring blessed peace to England's war-torn shores.
We have had enough of ruinous wars."
"I like thy courageous words well enough -
Fashioned I would say out of sterner stuff
Than expected of one with soft tresses
More often found in rich, velvet dresses
Sitting in state at the banquet table
Or lying in bed with a French fable."
"Had you seen her slice off a fowl rogue's ear

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Or summon in these knaves a Godly fear,
Thou wouldst not take her bold words so lightly,"
Said William, his rude cheeks shining brightly.
"I stand here, my brave maiden, much abashed
At my intemperate words that have crashed
Like a ruffled partridge killed in mid-flight.
Jonah will be with you in your next fight."
"This Jonah," said Will, "would not suit a whale.
It must have been some silly, old wives' tale."
"Time," said the maiden, "to be on our way.
We must find a camp by the end of day."
"But let us keep the horse before the cart,"
Quoth Jonah. "Pray tell your name 'ere we start?"
William audaciously broke in anew:
"The Brave Maiden, methinks, fits like a shoe."
"Such antique sayings are the rage of late.
Though I hesitate to be tempting fate,
And while it might prove a prodigious load;
I'll gladly take the name thou hast bestowed
And hope, in God's name, to do it credit
While you, my new friends, will ne'er regret it.
But enough of this procrastination!
I fear we fail of our destination."
Touching a sharp spur to the chestnut's flank,
She approved the wisdom of her sly prank.
My true given name, I shall hide awhile -
Not through base cowardice, but rather guile.

IV
The Camp

The roseate sun was now far past noon;
They would surely need to be stopping soon.
The maiden rode at a vigorous pace,
Not letting the worry show in her face.
A sharp, gnawing chill suffused the bright air;
She yearned for a short rest but did not dare.
They had seen no safe places all day long
And might meet raw brigands in bands too strong
For the three of them to defeat alone.
She felt her spirits falling like a stone.
Luck had been with her for five days running:
More to do with luck, she thought, than cunning.
She had tried to maintain a watchful guard;
Staying alert had never been so hard.
She had needed to sleep from time to time:
Pure luck not to fall to a savage crime.
Traversing a somber wood, tall and dense,
She felt her weary nerves grow taut and tense.
A soft, soothing breeze touched her furrowed brow.
The breeze seemed to whisper: "Look around now."
She turned in time to see a smiling fox
Disappear through a thicket and loose rocks.
She tried hard to see where the fox had gone;
But though her search was diligent and long,
Of the fox, she saw neither hide nor hair.
It seemed to have vanished into thin air.
The thicket looked to be a solid mass
Of thorns and branches with no way to pass.
Just as she decided to ride on by,
A movement in the thicket caught her eye.
In the breeze, the branches began to sway;
To her surprise, she saw a passageway.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Motioning her companions to follow,
She proceeded slowly, her head bent low.
With caution, they advanced ten rods or more,
Hardly suspecting what fate had in store.
The passage was narrow, thorns caught their clothes.
About to turn back, they suddenly froze
And looked all around in shock and wonder.
The thicket was strangely torn asunder
Leaving them in a large, grassy clearing
Hidden from all human sight and hearing.
A crystal clear spring fed a bubbling stream;
She thought this must be a fantastic dream.
Slightly hidden behind a spindly fern,
She saw the elusive fox smile and turn
To trot off quickly through the waving ranks
Of ferns leaving no time to voice her thanks.
Not since she had in desperation fled
>From the sight of friends and family dead,
Had she yet found a place to safely sleep
Without fear, and more, without cause to weep.
Overhanging rocks formed a shallow cave
That from the rude night wind some shelter gave
To the Brave Maiden and her band of two:
A yeoman's son and a wandering Jew.
She reflected sadly on this rough group.
How could she with such a powerless troop
Accomplish the bold plan she had in mind?
Somehow the wise Ormond she had to find.
And the march lords with their translucent pearls,
Will they be with her when her flag unfurls?
In her mind's eye, she saw a trampled field
And heard the clash of swords that angels wield.
Death's horses charged at furious paces,
Spurred by reapers with skeletal faces.
Death's vassals raced across a blood red sky;

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Many a brave knight on this field would die.
She recoiled in mute horror from this day;
Something told her there was no other way.
Wrapped thus in thought as supertime drew nigh,
Her gloomy vision caused a shallow sigh.
She barely saw Will standing at her feet.
“Milady, wouldst thou taste this roasted meat?”
“I see you have put your bow to good use
Whilst I have been dreaming with no excuse.
Tomorrow we put our camp in order
And make for ourselves a sturdy shelter.
I must also practice my archery
While you study infamous knavery.”
Dark storm clouds rode the skies that chilly night;
Deep, rolling thunder gave Jonah a fright.
He awoke to watch the rain slanting down,
His brow deeply creased by a worried frown.
How came a hedonistic Jew like me
To follow this maiden’s crusading plea.
In place of frothy ale and juicy boar,
I lie cold and drenched on this rocky floor.
I hesitate to think where she may lead;
The future holds many a daring deed.
Morning brought the sun in all its glory.
They set to work like the ancient story
Of the Pharaoh and the Israelite.
They worked from daybreak until evening’s bright
Star brought their labors to a weary halt,
They ate a crude meal without herbs or salt.
“What I would give now,” said the errant Jew,
“For some of that young widow’s rabbit stew.
She herself looked like such a saucy dish;
Suited me just as well if she served fish.”
Will ate his meal with a twinge of disgust.
“Regale us with brawling feats if you must,

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

But think of milady's delicate ears
When you long for widows of tender years."
"William, my thanks for your earnest concern;
But prithee, do you see my cheeks a burn?
Among fighting men, I spent goodly hours;
Their jokes would redden the palest flowers.
In the village, hard by our castle gate,
Nature's laws are learned with no prim debate.
Sheep and shaggy dogs have I seen mounted
So many times I have scarcely counted.
Farm life is not for the prating scholar,
Spouting speeches and wearing a collar.
Their tiresome lessons put me fast asleep
Without the age-old need for counting sheep.
To count the angels that fit on a pin
Is a task that I care not to begin.
Father sent for this dabbler from Bedford;
His pedantry left me completely bored.
He walked on muddy paths with lifted hem;
He noisily cleared his dry throat of phlegm.
Outdoors, he was wont to expectorate.
His love of fowl we could not satiate.
He finally was his own undoing:
Caught half naked in the village wooing.
In a rage, Father had him soundly whipped
And back to Bedford, he was promptly shipped.
I confess I did not mourn his parting
Nor yearn for his spitting and loud farting.
Now, my dear William, dost thou plainly see:
The facts of nature are not new to me?"
Over William's broad face spread disbelief,
>From which he sought to gain some quick relief.
"But then, milady, how came you to read?
In what manner was planted learning's seed?"
"My Mother was a lady much refined

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

(And here another thought lay just behind);
With her, formal lessons were much more fun.
Music, French, and the movement of the sun
Around the earth were daily, bookish tasks
That she enlivened by most cheerful masques
In which soldiers and servants had a part.
Father, the villain, was thrust through the heart.
Always were the village folk invited;
The small children were the most delighted.
The castle rang with loud peals of laughter:
Fond memories to carry hereafter.
But now, my kind friends let us take our rest
And in safety sleep in our new-built nest."
Speaking thus, the Maiden ruffled her hair
And took a deep breath of the crisp, night air.
Cruel and difficult times lay ahead,
But sufficient for now to go to bed.
In the bright morning, fresh ideas would grow;
And she would conquer that tautly strung bow.
She heard in the distance a lone wolf howl
And much closer in, the screech of an owl.
Again the soft breeze whispered in her ear:
Indistinct phrases that were far from clear.
Not knowing exactly the reason why,
She fell soundly asleep and did not cry.